

Overview of Education Issues and Programs in Latin America

December 19, 2007

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

RS22778

Summary

The United States has long supported education programs in Latin America, and has a vested interest in promoting educational progress in the region. In the last 20 years, most Latin American countries have taken significant steps to improve their education systems, but major challenges remain. Those challenges include unequal access to education, high dropout and repetition rates, poor teacher quality, and uneven assessments and accountability systems. Regional and bilateral education assistance programs administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have sought to help countries address many of those challenges. At the same time, the State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) has supported educational exchange and scholarship programs for Latin American students and teachers. This report provides an overview of the current level of educational attainment in Latin America, U.S. education programs in the region, and related legislative proposals. It will not be updated.

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Educational Attainment in Latin America

Recent Developments

As a whole, Latin American countries have made significant progress in improving their education systems, particularly in the last two decades. Governments have increased spending on education, expanded cooperation with the United States, the World Bank, and other donors, and pledged to achieve certain educational milestones established through the Organization of American States' Summit of the Americas process. Latin America is close to attaining the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of having universal primary enrollment by 2015, with 97% of students enrolled in primary school. The region is also making major progress towards ensuring that once enrolled, students complete their primary education. Improvements in basic education have led to an average youth literacy rate of 96%, exceeding the world average rate of 87%. The region has also achieved gender parity in literacy performance and primary school enrollment rates. Unlike most other regions, Latin American countries now have more girls than boys enrolled in secondary schools and universities.¹

In recent years, Latin American governments have implemented a variety of programs to increase the supply of and demand for education in their countries, many of which have specifically targeted disadvantaged students and school districts. In general, the success of those programs has hinged upon the accuracy of their targeting mechanisms in reaching the poorest, most disadvantaged students. One recent review of education interventions in Latin America suggests that providing free textbooks and creating classroom libraries are the most cost-effective ways to improve equity in education. Other interventions that are thought to be effective when implemented in poor districts are in-service teacher training programs and tutoring programs for students. Free food distribution programs, while showing positive effects on some learning outcomes, are not regarded as particularly cost-effective education interventions.² On the demand side, many countries in Latin America have successfully boosted enrollments by providing compensatory cash transfers to families in exchange for keeping their children in school.

Remaining Challenges

Despite these recent improvements, Latin America's education indicators still lag behind the developed world and many developing countries of comparable income levels in East Asia. Students from Latin America tend to underperform on international assessment tests, even when comparisons are limited to countries with similar income levels.³ Test scores on national exams for students across all education levels remain low, with students from rural, poor, Afro-descendant, and indigenous households having less access to quality education than the general population. In Brazil, nonwhite students score significantly lower than white students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds on national tests. Across the region, indigenous people complete fewer years of schooling than non-indigenous people and have lower economic returns

¹ Statistics on how regions are faring in reaching the Education MDGs are from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics. See http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/EducGeneral/MDG_2007Goal%202-3.pdf.

² Joan B. Anderson, "Improving Latin America's School Quality: Which Special Interventions Work?," *Comparative Education Review*, May 2005.

³ Emiliana Vegas and Jenny Petrow, *Raising Student Learning in Latin America: The Challenge for the 21st Century*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2007.

for each year of schooling completed.⁴ These gaps in access to quality education are most pervasive in countries with high levels of income inequality.

In addition to equity issues, grade repetition and dropout rates are still high, particularly at the secondary level, with boys tending to have higher dropout rates than girls. This problem is particularly pervasive in the poorer countries of Central America, where dropout rates stood at roughly 52% in Guatemala, 53% in Honduras, and 41% in Nicaragua in 2005.⁵ Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with a primary enrollment rate of some 67% and a primary completion rate of less than 30%, lags far behind other countries in the region on all education indicators.⁶

Few governments in Latin America invest the percent of their budgets on education that is recommended by international education experts.⁷ Moreover, most governments have devoted a much larger percentage of their education budgets to funding primary schools and subsidizing public universities rather than secondary schools. A recent World Bank study maintains that in order to reach a secondary target enrollment rate of 85%, Latin America would need to double their current resource allocation level for secondary education, which could be difficult given current resource constraints in many countries.⁸

U.S. Education Programs in Latin America

The United States has long been a major supporter of education programs in Latin America. Education assistance programs are generally administered by USAID, whereas most educational exchange and scholarship programs are run by the State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA).

U.S. Agency for International Development

USAID's Bureau of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) implements regional and bilateral education assistance programs in Latin America. Those programs focus on: increasing resources for basic education, providing teacher training, improving the quality of curricula and teaching materials, strengthening parental and community engagement in schools, and increasing access to educational opportunities for disadvantaged youth. In FY2006, the U.S. government provided some \$73.4 million in total education assistance to Latin America. Total education assistance fell to roughly \$54.4 million in FY2007. The FY2008 request for education in Latin America was reduced again to \$39.4 million.

⁴ Gillette Hall and H.A. Patrinos, eds. *Indigenous Peoples, Poverty and Human Development in Latin America 1994-2004*, Washington DC: World Bank, 2005.

⁵ United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2006*, p. 400.

⁶ These figures are taken from the website of USAID in Haiti, available at <http://www.usaid.gov/ht/education.htm>. No recent UNESCO or ECLAC education data are available for Haiti.

⁷ Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas, 2007, "2007: A Lot to Do: Report Card on Education in Central America and the Dominican Republic."

⁸ Emanuela di Gropello, ed. *Meeting the Challenges of Secondary Education in Latin America and East Asia*, World Bank, 2006, p. xxviii.

Regional Programs

There are three major regional education assistance programs supported by USAID in Latin America. In 2001, President Bush established the **Centers of Excellence for Teacher Training (CETT)** initiative in order to strengthen the quality of literacy instruction offered in Latin America. Since 2002, CETT has provided training and follow-up support to more than 15,000 teachers of Grades 1-3 from fifteen countries in the region. CETT programs are offered at regional training centers located in Peru, Jamaica, and Honduras. CETT plans to have trained a total of 20,000 teachers by 2009, with the aim of improving the basic literacy instruction offered to some 650,000 children.⁹ The **Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL)**¹⁰ is a private group that seeks to monitor equity and quality in national and regional education programs in Latin America. It publishes “report cards” on educational performance in each country in the region, compiles and disseminates best practices, and convenes conferences and seminars on education in the Americas. The **Cooperative Association of States for Scholarships (CASS)**, founded in 1985, provides two-year scholarships for disadvantaged students and rural professionals from Central America, Haiti, and Mexico to community colleges in the United States. The students receive technical and leadership training on how to promote economic and social development in their countries of origin. More than 5,000 individuals have graduated from the CASS program. The CASS program is similar to a past scholarship program, the Caribbean and Latin American Scholarship Program (CLASP), which provided academic and/or technical training in the United States to more than 23,000 individuals from Latin America and the Caribbean between 1985 and 1996.

Country Programs

In Latin America, USAID currently provides bilateral education assistance to the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru. Other countries that receive assistance through USAID’s regional education programs include Belize, Bolivia, Ecuador, Grenada, Guyana, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. Many of these country programs are implemented by USAID’s partner organizations through the “Equip123” contracting mechanism. Equip 1 programs focus on building education quality in the classroom, school and community. Equip 2 programs aim to improve educational systems and management. Equip 3 programs seek to serve out-of-school youth.

The largest bilateral education programs are in Haiti and Honduras. In FY2006, Haiti received \$10.4 million to support basic education programs and \$2.5 million to support higher education programs. According to USAID, ongoing U.S.-supported education programs have lowered dropout rates and raised the performance of more than 75,000 Haitian youth. In Honduras, USAID has helped the government to develop new curriculum standards and a monthly evaluation system to ensure that students are learning math and reading skills. The chart below displays funding amounts for USAID country education assistance programs for FY2006, FY2007, as well as the FY2008 funding request for each country.

⁹ For more information, see the Centers for Excellence in Teacher Training’s (CETT) website, <http://www.readingforallchildren.org/>.

¹⁰ PREAL was jointly established in 1995 by the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, DC, and the Corporation for Development Research in Santiago, Chile. For more information on its activities and publications, see <http://www.preal.org/>.

Table I. USAID Bilateral Education Assistance Programs in Latin America
(U.S. \$ in millions)

Country	FY2006 Actual	FY2007 Est.	FY2008 Request
Dominican Republic	1.5	1.7	2.0
El Salvador	4.3	3.5	3.0
Guatemala	4.3	3.5	3.0
Haiti	12.8	5.5	6.8
Honduras	11.8	7.8	4.7
Jamaica	3.4	3.0	2.0
Mexico	7.0	0.5	2.7
Nicaragua	5.7	4.7	1.7
Peru	2.5	2.5	2.5
Total Bilateral Assistance	53.3	32.7	28.4

Sources: U.S. State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, FY2008*; FY2007 estimates obtained in an email from the State Department's Bureau of Foreign Assistance on 12/12/2007.

State Department

The State Department supports and administers most U.S. education and cultural exchange programs, as well as some scholarship programs that benefit Latin American students. In March 2007, President Bush announced the creation of a **Partnership for Latin American Youth** program, a \$75 million initiative over three fiscal years to provide English training for students, home-country and U.S.-based study opportunities, and skills development for high school aged students in Latin America.¹¹ In 2006, the **Study of the United States Institute for Student Leaders** brought 35 Latin American undergraduate students to the United States for an intensive course of study on U.S. society, culture, history, and values. In addition, the **Fusion Arts Exchange** enabled twelve talented undergraduates from the region to participate in intensive academic exchanges with institutions focused on their respective fields of expertise. The best known graduate fellowship program funded by the State Department is the **Fulbright Foreign Student Program**. The **Fulbright Program** provides fellowships to foreign graduate students for study and research abroad. In 2007, 389 Latin American students were given Fulbright scholarships to study at U.S. universities. On a recent visit to the region, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said that the United States has begun to regain ground lost to Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom as the primary destination for Latin American students seeking to studying abroad, despite the additional visa requirements that have been put in place since September 11, 2001.¹²

¹¹ For a description of the initiative, see "Fact Sheet: Advancing the Cause of Social Justice in the Western Hemisphere," press release, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 5, 2007. In FY2007, the State Department devoted roughly \$10 million to support the Partnership for Latin American Youth, including some \$2.5 million from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) budget. ECA activities will continue at about the same level in FY2008. However, since President Bush had already submitted his FY2008 budget request prior to the announcement of the Partnership, the request does not include increased funding to support its programs. Source: Personal correspondence with ECA official, November 1, 2007.

¹² "U.S. Woos Latin American Students After Post 9-11 Decline," *CNN*, August 21, 2007.

While applications for student visas to the United States have declined in recent years, the number of exchange visas granted to students and professionals from Latin America and other regions has been increasing. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) supports a number of **International Visitor Leadership Programs** that have enabled young professionals to travel to the United States for training and enrichment programs. In recent years, special efforts have been made to provide opportunities to candidates from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Afro-Latinos and indigenous groups. ECA also provides visitor programs for foreign educators who teach English as a foreign language and/or American studies through institutes and teaching assistant programs. The **Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program** brings mid-career professionals from developing countries to the United States for a year of non-degree, graduate-level course work in their field of professional expertise. In 2007, 19 Latin Americans received Humphrey fellowships. The State Department also gives grants to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for citizen exchange programs. The 2006 grants included an exchange program between immigrant youth in San Diego, California and internally displaced young people in Bogota, Colombia, and a film, mural, and theater exchange project between the Harlem neighborhood of New York City and El Alto and Potosi, Bolivia.¹³

Legislative Initiatives

In the 110th Congress, H.R. 176 (Lee), the Shirley A. Chisholm United States-Caribbean Educational Exchange Act of 2007, was passed (371-55) by the House on July 31. It would authorize assistance to the countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to fund educational development and exchange programs. It would provide two-year scholarships in the United States for secondary students, four years of study for undergraduate students, 30 months of study for graduate students, and up to one year of study for post-graduate students and scholars from CARICOM countries. In return, the students would be required to either return to work in a CARICOM country or to work in a capacity that directly benefits a CARICOM country for a period of time equal to the length of their scholarship, not to exceed two years.

H.R. 2092 (Lowey)/S. 1259 (Clinton), the Education for All Act of 2007 (introduced on May 1, 2007 in both the House and the Senate) would amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 to provide assistance for developing countries to improve their basic education systems. The bill would also establish the achievement of universal basic education in all developing countries as an objective of U.S. foreign assistance.

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¹³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2006 Grants Awarded, at <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/citizens/culture.grants/awarded.htm>.

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